

Assisting Veterans in Recovering from Military Sexual Trauma (MST): Things all VA staff can do

Veterans who experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment during their military service — also known as **military sexual trauma (MST)** — can face unique obstacles to seeking help. Together, we can create an environment at VA that is sensitive to their needs and that can help them move forward in their recovery.

Know the facts.

- **Both men and women and Veterans of different races, sexual orientations, and every service era report having experienced MST.** It's good practice to behave in MST-sensitive ways with every Veteran you interact with, even if you don't know if he or she experienced MST.
- **Every VA health care facility provides free services for mental and physical health conditions related to MST.** Veterans do not need documentation of their experiences and some Veterans may be able to receive MST-related services even if they are not eligible for other VA care. Veterans do not need to be service connected (have a VA disability rating.)
- **Every facility has an MST Coordinator** to serve as a point person for Veterans and staff on MST-related issues.

Remember, you may be the first person an MST survivor has contact with at VA. You have the power to shape his or her first impressions and convey that VA is here to help.

Recognize how stressful coming to VA can be for some Veterans.

- **Many MST survivors have had the experience of reaching out for help and receiving negative responses.** This may make them anxious or wary about seeking help from VA. Even if it's not visible, they may be in a great deal of emotional and/or physical pain as they're talking with you. It may be very difficult for them to focus or remember information.
- **MST survivors are often very watchful, knowing that bad things can happen even in places or with people that initially seemed safe.** As they're talking to you, MST survivors may be on guard for something bad to happen. Crowds, noises, and open areas can make them nervous. Dismissive, inattentive, or contradictory behavior can make them question your trustworthiness or desire to help.
- **Angry outbursts, crying, or appearing emotionally shut down may be signs that a Veteran is distressed.** This may be because something in the environment or your interaction has been triggering — that is, was a reminder of his/her experiences of MST or otherwise made him/her feel physically or emotionally unsafe.

Things all VA staff can do:

- **Privacy is always more important than convenience.** Ask sensitive questions in a private setting. Always make sure that confidential information is not overheard by others. Make sure any documents visible to others don't have a Veteran's MST status or other private information.
- **Respond sensitively when a Veteran tells you he/she experienced MST.** Respond in a way that treats this information as precious, for it is; the Veteran has given you a rare gift of trust. For example, in a genuine and unhurried way, say "I'm sorry that happened to you. Thank you for trusting me with this." Be human: show you heard, are concerned, and want to help. These simple things can be incredibly healing to Veterans.
- **Be welcoming, patient, and supportive.** Let Veterans know it's okay to take their time. Offer to write things down for them. If a Veteran appears to be in distress, ask if he/she is okay and what you can do to help. Remember that his/her reaction may be due to being triggered by something and may not be about you personally. If you can't directly address the cause of the Veteran's distress, at least offer information that might be helpful. For example, if there is a delay, explain that and let him/her know how long it will be. If you make a mistake, apologize; that can go a long way to helping the interaction.
- **Be aware of your body language.** Verbal and nonverbal behavior both matter — *how* you say something may be more important than *what* you say. Make eye contact and speak in a quiet, calm tone. Slow yourself down. Make sure you communicate that you're paying attention and are ready to help.
- **Help Veterans have a sense of control over what's happening.** Explain to them what their options are in a given situation, to give them choices. Ask if they have any preferences or special needs to accommodate: "Is there anything I should keep in mind or do to make this easier for you?" Ask before taking action: "Would it be okay if I looked at the paperwork you've brought in?" Let Veterans know what to expect — explain how a process will work and what will be needed at each step. If sensitive information is going to be discussed, ask Veterans if they feel comfortable meeting with someone of your gender: "Are you okay with meeting with a (male or female) staff member today?"
- **Know who your MST Coordinator is.** A list of facility MST Coordinators, along with additional information and resources, is available at vawww.mst.va.gov

Help doesn't need to be big or dramatic. Sometimes, it's the little things you do that show you're concerned and care.